

Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

The usual understanding of this well-known parable goes something like this: “A loving father had two sons. One was good and obedient. The younger was rebellious and ran away after receiving his inheritance. This younger son went through his money quickly through sinful living and found himself in dire circumstances. At his lowest point he came to his senses, repented, and went home where he was warmly received by his father. The older, obedient son resented the warm welcome his brother received.”

Taking this understanding of the parable, we usually say that the younger son represents sinful humanity, the loving father represents God, and the obedient older brother represents those in the covenant community who resent those to whom God in his mercy has offered salvation.

There’s only one problem with this understanding and with these representations. Considering the mores of the Middle Eastern society in which Jesus lived and taught our usual understanding of the parable could not be more incorrect.

Space does not allow in a setting such as these emails a complete explanation of the nature of Middle Eastern culture. A few examples will have to suffice.

By telling his father that he wanted his share of the inheritance, the younger son was saying that he wished his father was dead. In the Middle East, the allegiance owed by a son to his father is absolute and the age of the son does not alter this obligation in the least. A friend of mine began telling a group of Middle Eastern people this parable and an argument broke out, many of the people vehemently denying even the possibility that any son could be so disrespectful of his father. Imagine how Jesus’ first listeners reacted!

However insolent the younger son’s request, the father acceded to it. To the Middle Eastern mind, this is unthinkable. The father is a weak and pathetic parent. He is a disgrace.

Note that the father “divided his property between them.” In other words, the older brother also received his share of the inheritance. He, too, has acted shamefully. He should have loudly and publicly renounced this gift. His failure to do so makes him no better than his brother.

One aspect of this parable that is often overlooked is that not only are all of the relationships in the family destroyed, the relationship of the family with the rest of the community is broken. In agricultural communities, even in our own time and culture, neighbors work together to help each other out. By selling off most of his property, the father has removed himself from the fellowship of his village.

The phrase used to describe the younger son's reaction to his poverty is well-known in other first-century literature as is its meaning in that time. "(H)e came to himself" means he remembered from what family he came. It is almost as if the younger son said, "Hey! My name is Johnson!" Notice that nowhere in the parable is it said that the younger son repents. There is no indication that he is sorry for his actions. He is starving and has thought of a place to get food.

When the father sees the younger son approaching, he runs to him and throws his arms around him. The Greek word used here indicates a desperate sprint. Again, the father is acting dishonorably. Middle Eastern men of status do not run. They walk slowly in a dignified manner. To run is to act shamefully. Throwing his arms around the son is an act of protection. It was the younger son's actions that precipitated the break in the community's harmony. It would be natural for the neighbors to react violently to him. In addition, the Law of Moses stipulated that such a rebellious child should be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 21:18 - 21).

In the Middle East, if one wishes to reconcile with your neighbors, you prepare a feast. If the neighbors desire the reconciliation, they attend the feast. If they do not wish to reconcile, they do not come.

What will never happen in the Middle East is for an oldest son to learn of a feast given by his father by hearing the sound of the festivities. His place is at the door, greeting the family's guests. He would also never refuse to attend a banquet given by his family. Nor would a father ever "plead" with his son. The father speaks and the son obeys. It does not matter if the son is five years old or fifty; he would never disobey his father's word.

The parable ends with no resolution. Every relationship in the family has been broken. There is nothing in any of the actions of the father or the two sons that is not shameful.

Does the father represent God? If so, the parable presents an image of God never before voiced. Instead of the glory and majesty of God such as depicted in Isaiah's vision (Isaiah 6: 1 - 8), the God Jesus describes makes himself weak, shameful, and the object of scorn and derision. Would the Creator of the universe debase himself in such a way? In the season of Lent, do we even need to ask?

*Though he was in the form of God,
he did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*